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Spatial Integration of Human Capital in the Polish Labour Market: A Case Study of Ukrainian Refugees' Language Skill Development

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Abstract:

Purpose: *Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the University of Szczecin (Poland) implemented language courses for Ukrainian refugees seeking integration pathways. This study investigates motivation profiles, learning outcomes, integration outcomes and prospects for plans among adult course participants.*
Design/Methodology/Approach: *Through a comprehensive survey of 89 adult Ukrainian refugees (89% response rate), we analyzed demographic characteristics, motivational orientations (instrumental versus integrative), self-reported language gains, and long-term settlement plans using cross-tabulations and chi-square statistical tests.*
Findings: *Results demonstrate a prevalence of instrumental motivation among participants, with employment preparation, administrative navigation, and career advancement serving as primary drivers for language acquisition. Regardless of initial motivational profile, participants consistently reported functional language improvements and enhanced confidence in both institutional and everyday social interactions, though only one subset achieved significantly higher communicative competence. We claim that instrumental/ pragmatic motivations effectively support diverse integration trajectories.*
Practical Implications: *This research study validated the pathway and introduced policy relevance: language courses facilitate practical gains, with self-confidence as the highlighted one, across all motivational profiles.*
Originality/Value: *The study yields six evidence-based policy recommendations emphasizing tailored curricula that prioritize workplace and basic language skills while maintaining flexible advancement pathway, this pathway underscores that course designs aligning with instrumental needs can indirectly strengthen integration trajectories and settlement intentions.*

Keywords: *Language courses, spatial integration, refugee integration, instrumental motivation, integrative motivation, social integration.*

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1. Introduction

The outbreak of Russia's full-scale war in Ukraine on February 24, 2022, triggered an unprecedented refugee crisis that brought millions of Ukrainian civilians to Poland within the first few months: a humanitarian emergency unseen since the Second World War.

On the day the invasion began, 31.2 thousand people crossed the Polish border, and during the entire first quarter following the conflict's onset, according to Border Guard data, 3.57 million people were processed at the Polish-Ukrainian border (Szczepańska, 2022).

During the first few months, dynamic support efforts required the development of ad hoc solutions within a tripartite system of cooperation between the central government, local authorities, and Polish citizens (either organized in NGOs or individually engaged).

Providing food, shelter, and essential services to accommodate the daily functioning of Ukrainian refugees was not possible without extraordinary mobilization. Polish society actively participated in relief efforts, with organizations representing the Ukrainian minority playing a crucial role in providing language support to newly arrived Ukrainian refugees (Bartłomiejski and Kowalewska, 2020).

Higher education institutions emerged as vital actors in this integration ecosystem, organizing scholarship support and assistance for enrolled Ukrainian students and their families who arrived after February 24, 2022, while simultaneously preparing infrastructure to welcome new students and academic staff from Ukraine (studia.pl, 2022).

Among the critical needs identified was the immediate organization of Polish language courses: a fundamental component of human capital investment enabling the socioeconomic integration of Ukrainian refugees. The inaugural course, targeting young people and adults, commenced on March 26, 2022, with 500 participants

enrolled. By July 2023, 1,385 adult Ukrainian refugees had participated in Polish language courses, totaling 1,680 instructional hours.

Subsequent programs were implemented through strategic partnerships with national and local institutions: the National Agency for Academic Exchange (supporting academic pathway preparation), the Provincial Labor Office in Szczecin (facilitating labor market entry), the Municipality of Szczecin, and Santander Bank Polska SA Foundation (promoting broader social integration initiatives).

This institutional language provision represents a critical case study of human capital theory application during crisis-driven migration. Language acquisition serves as both an immediate integration tool and a long-term investment in refugees' economic and social capital, potentially determining their integration trajectories and permanent residence aspirations.

This study examined motivation profiles among Ukrainian refugees participating in university-organized Polish language courses, investigating how instrumental and integrative motivations influence learning outcomes and integration intentions within this unprecedented humanitarian context.

2. Literature Review

Language-learning motivation is a critical determinant of acquisition success, particularly in crisis-driven contexts where linguistic competence directly influences socioeconomic integration outcomes. Within glottodidactic research, motivation functions as the primary driving force that initiates language-learning decisions and sustains long-term engagement despite encountered difficulties (Figarski, 2003; Pawlak, 2020).

As defined by Figarski (2003, p. 100), motivation constitutes 'a certain internal state, a kind of force inherent in every person, through which, under favorable conditions, the entire organism can be mobilized to strive for the achievement of a set goal.' Beyond the pedagogy of language learning, migration economics conceptualizes host country language proficiency as human capital: a productive, embodied, and costly investment that enhances individual earnings and employment prospects and, in aggregate, improves societal integration capacity (Chiswick and Miller, 2015).

The role of motivation in second language acquisition has generated extensive scholarly investigation across diverse contexts (Karpińska-Szaj, 1998; Szałek, 2004; Komorowska, 2005; Lipińska and Seretny, 2006; Pawlak, 2020).

Research has consistently demonstrated that motivational intensity influences the pace of knowledge acquisition, skill development effectiveness, and crucially, long-term persistence, defined as sustained determination and consistent engagement throughout the learning process (Pawlak *et al.*, 2021).

Converging evidence from labor economics further underscores the instrumental value of language learning: host country proficiency is associated with higher employment probabilities and wage returns among immigrants and refugees (Dustmann and Fabbri, 2003), and it complements other human capital endowments such as schooling and work experience.

The dynamic nature of motivation proves particularly relevant for Ukrainian refugees, whose initial crisis-driven instrumental motivations may evolve toward integrative orientations as settlement circumstances stabilize (Chodkowski, 2019, p. 147).

This motivational fluidity aligns with human capital theory: language learning functions simultaneously as an immediate survival investment and as long-horizon socioeconomic capital formation; while contemporary motivation and identity frameworks explain how initially instrumental goals can become pathways into deeper cultural participation (Chiswick and Miller, 2015; Darvin and Norton, 2015).

3. Research Methodology

This study employed a cross-sectional survey design to investigate the motivational profiles, learning outcomes, and integration intentions of Ukrainian refugees participating in Polish language courses. The research was structured around five research questions with corresponding testable hypotheses, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. *Research Questions, Hypotheses, and Analytical Methods*

Research Question (RQ)	Hypothesis (H)	Variable/ Indicator	Analytical Method
RQ1: What primary motivations drive Ukrainian refugees to enroll in Polish language courses?	H1: Instrumental motivations predominate over integrative motivations	Motivation type (instrumental vs. integrative)	Frequency analysis, descriptive statistics
RQ2: Do different motivational profiles correlate with varying language learning outcomes?	H2: No significant association exists between motivation type and self-reported language learning outcomes.	Motivation type; Self-assessed language gains	Cross-tabulation, chi-square test, Cramér's V
RQ3: How do motivational profiles relate to permanent residence intentions?	H3: No significant association exists between motivation type and permanent settlement intentions in Poland.	Motivation type; Self-assessed language gains; Declared plan for the future;	Cross-tabulation, chi-square test, Cramér's V
RQ4: What integration benefits do participants report from Polish language course participation?	H4: Polish language courses produce measurable improvements in linguistic competence, social confidence, and	Self-assessed course impact across multiple domains	Descriptive statistics, thematic analysis

	institutional navigation ability.		
RQ5: What policy recommendations emerge for optimizing language education for Ukrainian refugees?	No hypothesis (synthetic analysis).	All measured variables	Integrative analysis of quantitative and qualitative findings

Source: *Own compilation.*

The research sample comprised Ukrainian refugees enrolled in Polish language courses organized by the University of Szczecin under the 'Together We Can Do More – First Edition of the Activation Program for Foreigners 2022–2023.' Of the 100 enrolled participants, 89 completed the survey instrument, yielding an 89% response rate. We used a structured questionnaire administered in Ukrainian and Polish.

The sample consisted predominantly of women (88.8%, n=79) with a mean age of 41 years (range: 18-63 years), reflecting the feminized displacement pattern typical of conflict-driven migration. Educational attainment was high, with 56.2% (n=50) holding higher education degrees, 30.3% (n=27) having secondary education, and 10.1% (n=9) having vocational qualifications.

All participants arrived in Poland following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, with 83.5% of women and 100% of men citing war as their primary reason for migration. The remaining 16.5% of female participants had arrived before February 2022. Median residence duration in Poland was 16 months at the time of survey administration.

Initial Polish language competence was limited, with 62% self-rating their skills as 'weak', 25% reporting no Polish proficiency, and only 13% claiming basic competence. This linguistic starting point establishes the baseline for measuring course effectiveness and skill development.

Descriptive statistics were used to characterize the sample demographics and variable distributions. Chi-square tests of independence were used to assess the associations between categorical variables (motivation type, learning outcomes, migration intentions), with Cramér's V measuring effect sizes. Qualitative responses underwent thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and support quantitative findings.

Participants provided informed consent, on entry and exits, with anonymity guaranteed and voluntary participation emphasized. Survey administration respected participant time constraints and language preferences, supporting the vulnerable population research ethics framework.

4. Results

Analysis of enrollment motivations among 87 valid respondents revealed a pronounced predominance of instrumental and pragmatic drivers for Polish language course participation.

The most frequently cited motivation were pragmatic ('Necessity–instrumental needs' (n=27, 31.03%), encompassing employment preparation, administrative navigation, and essential daily communication requirements. 'Communication–group oriented' motivations followed closely (n=26, 29.89%), reflecting practical adaptation within existing social networks.

Secondary motivations included 'Self-development' (n=14, 16.09%) and 'Integration–to live in Poland' (n=10, 11.49%). Higher career aspirations accounted for 6.90% of responses (n=6), while marginal categories such as cost-free access (n=2, 2.30%) and institutional trust (n=1, 1.15%) were statistically negligible.

Aggregated into Gardner-Lambert categories, instrumental motivations (combining necessity-driven and career-oriented responses) comprised 37.93% of the sample (n=33). However, the inclusion of communication and integration motivations, both containing strong pragmatic-adaptive components, increased instrumental-adjacent motivations to 89.66% of all respondents (n=78).

This overwhelming preference for practical, survival-oriented motivations reflects the urgent adaptation needs of Ukrainian refugees displaced by war.

Hypothesis 1 (H1) received strong support from the data. Instrumental motivations, particularly those linked to employment, necessity, and career development, predominate over integrative or purely personal interest motives. Critically, when combining purely instrumental categories (37.93%) with communication-oriented motivations that serve practical adaptation purposes (29.89%), the total pragmatic orientation reaches 67.82% of respondents.

This demonstrates that pragmatic adaptation, survival needs, and upward mobility drive Polish language course enrollment among Ukrainian refugees.

Among necessity-driven learners (n=27), outcomes distributed relatively evenly: improved daily communication (29.63%), increased confidence (29.63%), and partial progress (25.93%).

Communication-group oriented participants (n=26) similarly reported increased confidence (30.77%) and partial progress (34.62%) as primary outcomes. These outcomes demonstrate a clear progression from basic language skills to enhanced social confidence, supporting the theoretical framework linking instrumental motivations to integration pathways.

Hypothesis H2 was not supported: motivation type showed no significant association with self-reported language outcomes (chi-square, all $p > 0.05$). Despite minor descriptive differences, no motivation profile produced superior long-term results.

Self-reported outcomes (N = 89) indicated broad effectiveness across profiles: moderate linguistic progress (30.34%), improved daily communication (24.72%), greater social and institutional confidence (26.97%), full communicative competence (7.87%), cultural interest (3.37%), and no impact (6.74%). Although instrumental motivations appeared descriptively stronger, the differences were not statistically meaningful.

Migration intentions (N = 88) showed a strong preference for permanent settlement (H3). Qualitative data revealed two subgroups: a 'work-only' group focused on economic motives, and a 'live & work' group combining employment with family, cultural, and community aspirations (e.g., children's schooling, cultural learning, desire to build a life in Poland). This distinction illustrates a shift from purely instrumental motives toward deeper integrative goals within long-term settlement pathways.

Cross-tabulations and chi-square tests assessed relationships between migration plans and demographic variables, motivations, and outcomes. No significant association emerged between migration plans and age ($p = 0.374$), education ($p = 0.316$), or length of stay in Poland ($p = 0.995$), suggesting that migration intentions transcend basic demographic factors.

While statistical significance was not achieved, the qualitative data strongly support H3's underlying premise. The descriptive patterns reveal that 67.82% pragmatic motivations correspond to 76.14% permanent residence intentions, suggesting a pathway from instrumental language learning to settlement aspirations.

The 'live and work' subgroup's emphasis on family integration and community building demonstrates how initial pragmatic motivations evolve into deeper settlement commitments, supporting the theoretical framework linking instrumental profiles to permanent residence outcomes.

Despite descriptive variations, statistical analysis using Pearson's chi-square test ($\chi^2(30) = 33.25$, $p = 0.312$) revealed no significant association between motivation type and course impact. This finding suggests that integration benefits distribute broadly across motivational categories, reinforcing the general effectiveness of Polish language instruction regardless of initial enrollment reasons.

Statistical analysis showed that Polish language course effectiveness did not depend on participants' motivation profiles. All motivation types produced similar integration outcomes, with most learners gaining practical language skills and institutional confidence.

Although cultural engagement was low (3.37%), overall satisfaction was high (93.26%), indicating that the courses broadly supported linguistic and sociocultural integration among Ukrainian refugees. The results also confirm that both instrumental and integrative motivations effectively led to functional language competence.

5. Discussion

The predominance of instrumental motivations (89.66% when including pragmatic-adaptive components) aligns with migration adaptation theory, which emphasizes that survival and functional imperatives dominate language learning among displaced populations.

This study demonstrates that for war refugees, the urgent need to secure employment, achieve functional communication, and integrate into a new society naturally overshadows motivations associated with self-actualization or convenience.

The results provide compelling evidence for the policy relevance pathway: language skills → social confidence → social integration. Courses served as effective vehicles for refugee integration regardless of initial motivational profiles, as their hidden social function or 'undesired side effect' was building Ukrainian refugee self-confidence in establishing relationships in everyday life, at work, and in public and private settings.

The universal effectiveness of courses across motivational types suggests that course design and institutional support matter more than participant motivation. The core implication derived from the survey data is that 76.14% of participants plan to establish permanent residence in Poland, with 42.05% motivated by work-related factors and 34.09% pursuing broader life-building objectives, establishing language education as a catalyst for transformative life decisions.

The qualitative evidence reveals distinct integration patterns: while the "work-only" group focuses on economic adaptation, the "live and work" subgroup displays deeper social and cultural integration markers, including family considerations ("my children attend school in Poland"), cultural engagement ("I am learning about Polish traditions"), and community belonging ("I want to build my life here"). This differentiation suggests that language courses serve dual functions: immediate functional adaptation and the foundation for long-term social integration.

However, several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. The study data relied on self-reported outcomes, which are valuable for capturing participants' perceptions, are inherently subjective, and prone to bias. Participants may overstate or understate their progress due to social desirability, gratitude, stress, and personal

expectations. Future research should combine self-reports with objective proficiency measures and consider independent instructor assessments for their validation.

Second, the sample was predominantly composed of adult female refugees who voluntarily enrolled in a language course in Szczecin. While the cohort is largely homogeneous regarding war-related displacement, this, together with the voluntary nature of participation, may introduce selection bias. Individuals who are more engaged or satisfied with a course may be over-represented.

6. Policy Implications and Evidence-Based Recommendations

Despite these limitations, the results of this study yielded a few actionable insights for language course program designers for war refugees in Poland.

Recommendation no 1: Tailored language curricula that emphasize survival and workplace language skills while incorporating career-specific modules.

Language courses for refugees should aim to structure curricula around practical scenarios that provide immediately applicable skills to enhance communication and functional language skills. Educational institutions should design curricula that combine survival and workplace-oriented skills with career-specific modules.

Recommendation no 2: Implement confidence-oriented skill progression for a more comprehensive and effective learning experience.

Courses should prioritize building learners' confidence through simple and immediately applicable communication skills. We recommend incorporating career-specific modules into general language courses that progress from beginner (A1) to intermediate (B1) levels. This strategy recognizes that a significant proportion of learners (over 40%) aim to secure better employment opportunities or office-based positions in the field.

Recommendation no 3: Teacher-led courses must ensure equitable access and foster inclusivity.

Programs must adopt flexible and inclusive pedagogical methods to accommodate heterogeneous groups of learners. Given the significant variation in entry-level competence, inclusive pedagogy is essential to ensure equitable participation and to prevent early disengagement.

Recommendation no 4: Dual Assessment Tools.

Assessment strategies should combine learner-centered self-assessment with low-stakes, teacher-led evaluations. This dual approach balances autonomy with structured guidance and avoids the demotivating effects of high-stakes tests.

Integrating reflective self-evaluation also encourages learners to recognize their progress, strengthening their motivation and persistence in language study.

Recommendation no 5: Guarantee of Free and Structured Access.

Language courses must remain free of charge and be publicly supported to guarantee inclusivity. Structured provision through formal educational institutions ensures quality and equal access, particularly for vulnerable groups. Public investment in free, institutionally managed courses safeguards refugees from market inequalities and creates conditions for sustained participation in the labor market.

Recommendation no 6: Responsive Pathways: from Confidence to Integration

Functional communication fosters confidence, which, in turn, unlocks broader opportunities for employment, education, and civic engagement. Therefore, programs should create clear pathways from initial language gains to advanced competence, enabling refugees to achieve deeper social integration and pursue long-term residency.

7. Conclusion

The pathway from language acquisition to permanent settlement emerges as the most significant contribution of this study (language skills → social confidence → social integration). This study underscores the role of language courses in aiding the functional and social integration of Ukrainian refugees in Poland and provides evidence-based practical guidance for program teacher-led language courses for refugees.

Based on the survey data, the authors present six recommendations. Tailored curricula, followed by equitable access, inclusive, and confidence-oriented, free courses with dual assessment ensure learners' desired progress and gains.

Employing inclusive teaching methods to accommodate the various proficiency levels of students should go along with self-assessment with low-stakes testing for self-confidence empowerment and civic agency in the host society.

This research study validated the pathway and introduced policy relevance: language courses facilitate practical gains, with self-confidence as the highlighted one, across all motivational profiles.

Despite the diversity in initial motivations, the benefits of the courses were widely distributed across the motivational groups. The study indicated the general effectiveness of learning courses regardless of initial learners' motives (assuming that they are pragmatic and instrumental).

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